

October 23, 2002: Urge China's President to Advance Religious Freedom and Protect North Korean Refugees

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, yesterday wrote President Bush, asking him to raise religious freedom issues and the plight of North Korean refugees in China during his upcoming summit with Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

"Despite the growing religious activity in China during the last two decades, the government continues its violent crackdown on the freedom of religion and belief of evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and other groups, such as the Falun Gong, that the government has labeled 'evil cults,'" wrote Chair Felice Gaer, on behalf of the Commission. "The Commission has concluded that religious freedom conditions have deteriorated in the past year." The text of the letter follows:

October 22, 2002

Dear Mr. President:

We have been heartened when you have publicly spoken out on religious freedom in China and expressed concern for the people of North Korea. We are convinced that those who are suffering repression in those two countries are even more heartened. In regard to your upcoming meeting with Chinese President Jiang Zemin and pursuant to its advisory responsibilities under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom respectfully urges you to raise several measures that would advance religious freedom in China and protect North Korean refugees.

In your February 2002 speech at China's Qinghua University, you said: "Freedom of religion is not something to be feared, it's to be welcomed" Yet, it is clear from events since then that the Chinese government has not taken steps to protect the religious freedom of its citizens. In fact, despite the growing religious activity in China during the last two decades, the government continues its violent crackdown on the freedom of religion and belief of evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, and other groups, such as the Falun Gong, that the government has labeled "evil cults." In October 2001, the Secretary of State determined for the third straight year that China was a "country of particular concern" under IRFA, and the State Department's most recent International Religious Freedom Report states that China's respect for religious freedom remains poor. The Commission has concluded that religious freedom conditions have deteriorated in the past year.

As repressive as conditions in China are, tens of thousands of North Koreans have nevertheless fled there to escape the dire economic and political conditions in their own country. Although the Chinese government has permitted some North Koreans to resettle in South Korea in recent months, many more have been forcibly repatriated by Chinese authorities despite China's ratification of international treaties on refugees. North Koreans who return - voluntarily or otherwise - face imprisonment, or even death, at the hands of the North Korean authorities.

The Commission respectfully urges you to continue to raise religious freedom concerns and the plight of North Korean refugees with the Chinese President.

Specifically, as our two countries expand economic ties and cooperation in the war against terrorism, we recommend that, in accordance with China's obligations under the international human rights treaties to which it is already a party, you urge the Chinese government to:

halt the forced repatriation of North Koreans, grant refugee status to those who meet international criteria, and cooperate with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees;

release persons in China confined on account of their religion or belief and stop further detention, imprisonment, torture, and other forms of ill treatment of persons on that basis;

reform laws, policies, and practices that govern religious and spiritual organizations and activities. The release of a few individuals imprisoned on account of their religion or belief, while welcome, does not represent the kind of systemic improvements that are necessary to bring China's laws and practices into conformity with international law, and thus eliminate state control of, and undue government interference with, religious groups and the conduct of religious activities;

provide access to religious persons in all regions of China by foreign diplomats, humanitarian organizations, and international human rights and religious freedom organizations, as well as this Commission and delegations of the Congress (including access to unofficial Catholic Bishops, evangelical Protestants, members of the Falun Gong, the young Panchen Lama, and others in Tibet and Xinjiang who are imprisoned, in detention, or under house arrest); and

respect the right to freedom of religion or belief as an integral part of the government's approach to issues of counter-terrorism and security, in particular among Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province where the government has repressed peaceful religious practice. You have stressed on several occasions that the fight against terrorism must not serve as an excuse to persecute religious minorities in any country.

Thank you for considering the Commission's recommendations.

Respectfully,

Felice Gaer

Chair

Felice D. Gaer, Chair

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